

Alexander von Humboldt Biography

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Biography

Humboldt was born in Berlin, the son of a Prussian army officer and a Huguenot (French Protestant) mother. He experienced poor health as a child and was unimpressive as a student. He was raised under his mother's strict Calvinistic beliefs and remained unmarried throughout his life.

Humboldt pursued a lifetime of exploration and discovery. He was a master of observation and analysis. Never credited with any major discoveries of his own, his research greatly contributed to the knowledge of Western society.

Perhaps his most notable accomplishment was his five-year expedition to South and Central America (1799-1804). At that time Spain was preoccupied with the pursuit of wealth and conquest in its American colonies. It was rare for a learned individual like Humboldt to gain permission to visit these areas. Once there, his perseverance took him to the edges of human endurance.

South America was a largely unknown land, and much of what Humboldt observed was new knowledge. Travelling by foot and canoe, he discovered a connection between the Orinoco and Amazon river systems. He climbed volcanoes in Ecuador and observed how they were positioned in a line, as though following a flaw in the Earth's crust. He collected thousands of plant specimens. He observed ocean currents in the Pacific Ocean including one, now called the Peru Current, which was named after him. No matter where he went or what he did, he tirelessly recorded his observations. This proved to be Humboldt's greatest legacy.

Humboldt resided in Paris from 1805 to 1827, enjoying a cosmopolitan lifestyle that allowed him to associate with many of his fellow scientists. He published more than 30 volumes of his data during this time, proving his excellence as a writer and artist.

Humboldt spent his later years in Berlin, where he had become quite a notable figure. At the invitation of the Russian government, he traveled for three months in the Urals and Siberia, and brought with him his knowledge of mining techniques. The ceremonial trappings of this visit only interfered with his ability to observe the region.

Humboldt died while working on the fifth volume of his book *Kosmos*. This work was his attempt to give a unified explanation for all existence. He had been a meteorologist, botanist, geologist, geographer and oceanographer. It was only natural for a man who seemed to know something about everything to develop such an all-encompassing view of life.